



INTERLACINGS

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INTERLACINGS

THE CRAFT OF
CONTEMPORARY ART

September 11–November 21, 1998

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART AT CHAMPION

This exhibition was organized by
Berta Sichel, guest curator.





INTERLACINGS: THE CRAFT OF CONTEMPORARY ART examines the work of seven artists who use traditional craft techniques, materials, or processes to produce conceptually oriented art. In so doing, as Berta Sichel reveals in her essay, they cross the boundary between contemporary art and craft.

In different ways, the artists link craft to idea. Craft has always implied function, and Josiah McElheny and Teresa Serrano extend that assumption. Serrano uses horse blankets in creating her sculptures, while McElheny produces glass trays and goblets that beg to be used. Evidence of handwork is vital to craft, and it is prominent in Roxy Paine's trays of mushrooms and Sonia Labouriau's *urucum* paste birds. The materials of craft are usually taken from the natural world, so Sylvia Benitez hikes through the local countryside for the vines and twigs she incorporates into large spherical sculptures. Finally, the notion that the craft producer is typically female is explored in the feminist works of Elena del Rivero and Michèle Blondel.

Embracing the tools and methods of crafts, these artists articulate a new aesthetic language that addresses ideas of self-definition, cultural identity, and postmodern art practice.

— CYNTHIA ROZNOY



INTERLACINGS: THE CRAFT OF CONTEMPORARY ART

BERTA SICHEL



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uch of the art and the critical literature about it during the last fifteen years has focused on the dramatic encounter between conceptualism and a certain style of narrative art which addresses gender, race, or identity issues in a manner resembling advertising. Virtually unnoticed in the shadow of this extremely popular aesthetic lies a new exploration in contemporary art: the interlace between arts and crafts.

Divorced from art since the late nineteenth century and defined as "a hand labor devoid of intellectual content," craft has been regarded as an unlikely source for art.¹ Yet a recent marriage of contemporary art with crafts embraces an openness, playfulness, and malleability that has resulted in a new art. And this art, in turn, is characterized by a revitalization of techniques, skills, processes, and materials—concerns traditionally associated with crafts.

These new practices disrupt generally held notions about crafts and reorient our thinking about contemporary art. They assert that crafts can have a significant place in contemporary art, while art can take advantage of the technical finesse of crafts, as long as it remains a means rather than an end. The value of materials and skills, so critical to the craft media, now engages contemporary artists for it expands their ability to develop meanings and metaphors.

"Interlacings" demonstrates that this embrace of crafts in contemporary art is international, appearing in North America and Latin America as well as in Europe. Moreover, in contrast to

1. *Arts and Crafts* is the name of a movement begun in England during the last third of the nineteenth century by William Morris and inspired by the doctrines of John Ruskin and Augustus Pugin. In modern usage, the word *craft* refers to the art of forming handmade articles, usually decoratively designed and often useful or purposeful; see *Dictionary of Art Terms and Techniques* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 24.



above

Sonia Labouriau, Bird "migrating," from
MIGRATORY BIRDS, 1992-98

below and opposite page

Sonia Labouriau, Four movements to shape a bird,
from MIGRATORY BIRDS, 1992-98



the 1970s, when craft was incorporated in the work of feminist artists, this recent interface goes beyond gender.

The exhibition comprises a broad range of media. It is an assemblage of objects, often idiosyncratic, including balls of vines, symbolic rivers made of Mexican bullfighting blankets, artificial mushrooms, and glass vessels based on Renaissance paintings. In this sense, the exhibition can be likened to Umberto Eco's definition of an encyclopedia—a network without a center.² These materials address issues that preoccupy the best artists working today—issues of replication, originality, history, artifact display, displacement, nature, patriarchalism, religion, and sexuality. As Mary Bero observed about works like those in "Interlacings," the use of process is "alarming, controversial, [and] exhilarating," as well as necessary for "tearing down the walls [and] presenting new experiences."³ It is this convergence of art and craft that "Interlacings" seeks to explore.

2. Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), chap. 2 "Dictionary of Encyclopedia."

3. Mary Bero, "Art Versus Craft," *New Observations*, 98 (November–December 1993), p. 12.

Hands are Sonia Labouriau's basic tools. *MIGRATORY BIRDS* (1992–98) is the result of four sequential movements the artist makes with her hands, in a process "similar to the derivation of cursive writing."⁴ Her apparently rudimentary language, or personal code, is set in motion through a sequence of movements aimed at shaping never-identical birds with an amazing economy of means. Like a musical score, the sculptures express the artist's wish to create distinctive procedures that can be repeatedly performed, yet each time with a unique interpretation.

Born in California, where her late father, a well-known Brazilian scientist, was working, Labouriau now lives in Brazil, in

4. Artist's statement, n.d.





the state of Minas Gerais—a region rich in popular art, where local artisans make clay whistles in the form of birds that resemble Labouriau's. Her birds are made from a paste of *urucum*—a red natural pigment extracted from the seed of *bixa orellana*, a plant used by the indigenous people of South America both to color food and decorate the body. Nevertheless, they do not imitate folk art, and Labouriau is not even interested in the association.

MIGRATORY BIRDS echoes the idea of repetition, a feature also encountered in the works of Elena del Rivero, Sylvia Benitez, and Roxy Paine. Labouriau also stages "an aesthetic of disappearance" by placing the birds in water. After one or two days, the binder dissolves and the sculptures "migrate," returning to the condition of the *urucum* ink. MIGRATORY BIRDS thus operates like a reverse drawing, while the water is a transformation agent, suggesting the process of alchemy. The birds and their determined impermanence may be viewed in the context of the mobile and unforeseeable relationship between the global society and migratory people.

For Sylvia Benitez as well, hands are the basic tools. She uses a variety of vines—honeysuckle, wild grape, bittersweet, kudzu, and bejuco, a native Puerto Rican plant—to create ball sculptures that have a rare, undomesticated geometry. Each type of vine has its own peculiar color, shape, and texture. It is this diversity of attributes that intrigues Benitez, who explores the



above
Sylvia Benitez working with vines, 1997

opposite page
Sylvia Benitez. PETER AND PAUL, 1998 (detail)

natural characteristics of each material.

PETER AND PAUL (1998) is Benitez's most ambitious attempt at making sculpture with a harvested, noncommercial material. It takes a great deal of physical strength to construct each ball. To make a ball 5 feet in diameter, such as the two shown in this exhibition, Benitez harvests vines for four days. The process of making the sculptures usually takes a week. Intertwined and interwoven, Benitez asserts, they "evolve through [a] procedure of placement and repetition." Although they generally look similar, they are never identical. The simple round forms are held together by tension: no glue, nail, or wire provides a structural armature. "It is a wrestling match," the artist says, a question of will and submission and a confrontation between control and cooperation that enables Benitez to create unique and absorbing works, full of presence.⁵

5. Artist's statement, n.d.



PETER AND PAUL trespasses on conventional assumptions about materials. It is the antithesis of manufactured objects, maintaining a strong connection, formal and thematic, with the natural environment. This is the subtext of most of Benitez's work—thus also the seed jars of unfired clay in LEXICON FOR ELSIE (1997), a tribute to the artist's grandmother, one of the first women to teach botany at the University of Puerto Rico, who opened Benitez's

eyes to the power and beauty of nature.

Roxy Paine also insists that his work is about nature and its potential. He has an individual aesthetic that does not fit into any genre or style. Reading reviews of his past exhibitions, one might

10

above

Roxy Paine, *PSILOCYBE CUBENSIS FIELD*, 1997 (detail)
Polymer with lacquer and oil paint
4 1/4 x 328 x 222 in. (10.8 x 833.1 x 563.9 cm)

opposite page

Roxy Paine, *PSILOCYBE CUBENSIS TRAY*, 1997



well imagine that the writers are talking about completely different artists. As Eleanor Heartney wrote, reviewing Paine's first one-artist exhibition in 1995, "Paine offered a diverse series of absurdist investigations into artistic styles and political tastes..."⁶ Three years later, and with a couple of international exhibitions behind him, Paine continues his "absurdist investigations," and his most recent body of work can best be described as fields of hallucinogenic mushrooms and opiates.

Each mushroom is handmade of polymer, the form based on a mold Paine took from an actual mushroom. He then hand paints the objects, limiting his palette to the colors of the plants as they occur in nature. For Paine, these fields have two levels of meaning. First, "the field is about creating a visual equivalent to the hallucinogenic state, using the substance that causes that state." The second level resides in the metaphoric possibilities inherent to mushrooms, which can be both deadly and consciousness-altering. Paine's sculpted mushroom fields could be grown from the forest floor, as in *MUSHROOM FIELD* (1997), or from trays, as in *PSILO-CYBE CUBENSIS TRAY* (1997). His pop microparadises stimulate the viewer's imagination by reinventing the familiar.

Nature and the reinvention of the traditional are usually marked out as Teresa Serrano's conceptual boundaries. The two series she produced in 1995–96, *RIVERS* and *MOUNTAINS*, made of embroidered blankets—*petos*, as they are called in Mexico—bypass the established narrative of Mexican textile art.⁷ Ever since bullfighting was introduced into Mexico by the Spaniards, these blankets have been used to cover the horses, protecting them from

6. Eleanor Heartney, "Rosy Paine at Ronald Feldman," *Art in America*, 83 (November 1995), pp. 110–11.

7. Berta Sichel, "The Mountain, the River, the Stones," in Teresa Serrano, *exh. cat.* (Monterrey, Mexico: Galeria Ramis Barquet, 1996).

12

ight
Teresa Serrano, *THE RIVER*, 1996

opposite page
Teresa Serrano,
THE MOUNTAIN, 1995



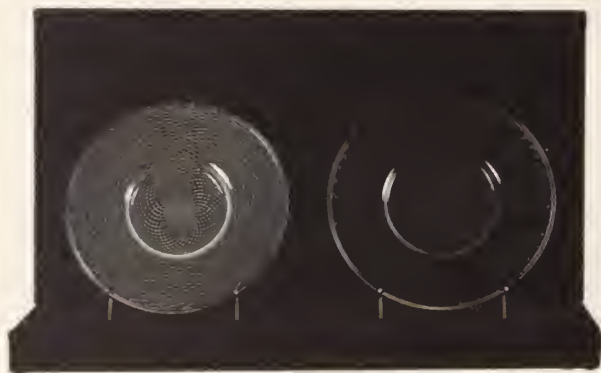


being gored by the bulls. The *petos* occupy a curious position within Mexico's textile tradition. Perhaps because the blankets must be as strong as armor, requiring several interwoven layers of *ixtle*—a dull white fiber made from the leaves of the *agave* plant—the work is done exclusively by men. *Petos* thus exist outside the historical association of textiles and women.

Serrano works with a group of artisans who make the *petos* to her specifications. In her work, the bulky blue cylinders of padded and embroidered fabric constructed of felt, cotton, and wool, and stuffed with *ixtle*, are raised off the ground by rigid metal supports. The artist says that they are hanged rivers, "killed" when industrialization and progress alter their courses and contaminate the water. As a series, *RIVERS* poetically evokes the fate of streams damaged or destroyed by disruptions to the ecosystem. By bringing traditional weaving techniques into a contemporary international art vocabulary, Serrano rewrites history with an eye to current issues such as the preservation of nature.

The mediation between the present and the past—that is, the closely considered understanding of the present as a continual reevaluation of the past—also defines the work of Josiah McElheny, a young glassblower gifted with a rare sense of craft and material.

McElheny's history is told through glass vessels, plates, and goblets, displayed in elegant vitrines, fabric-covered boxes, and on tables and shelves, and almost always accompanied by a text. Conceptually, he approaches the history



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Josiah McElheny, DEVELOPMENTS IN THE
SEARCH FOR INFINITY, 1998

opposite page
Josiah McElheny, FROM VERZELINI'S ACTS OF FAITH:
THE LAST SUPPER ACCORDING TO
BONIFAZIO PITATI AND BEATO ANGELICO, 1996

of his craft as a storyteller would. GLASS FROM THE LAST SUPPER ACCORDING TO JOSIAH MCELHENY AND ACCORDING TO VARIOUS MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE PAINTERS (1997) is a large table filled with blue and white chalices, decanters, and plates used for wine and bread, a recreation of objects similar to those depicted in representations of the Last Supper from these periods.

IN DEVELOPMENTS IN THE SEARCH FOR INFINITY (1998), McElheny considers the idea of perspective drawing developed by Renaissance painters in their search for the spiritual perfection of the image.⁸ In addition, according to the artist, painters devised geometric methodologies for creating the illusion of a three-dimensional space, using the vanishing point as a reference to construct pictures according to the laws of optics. These geometric methods were also used by glassblowers looking for a perfected, "spiritually true reality through the use of point perspective." The result was the creation of elaborate patterning within

8. From the text panel
component of Josiah McElheny's
The Search for Infinity,
1997





above

Michèle Blondel, SELF-PORTRAIT
AS A MERMAID, 1997

opposite page

Michèle Blondel, SELF-PORTRAIT AS A UNICORN,
1997 (detail)

the glass, creating the illusion of infinite distance and inspiring a sense of spirituality from endless, geometric patterns.

In McElheny's work—as in Paine's mushrooms and Labouriau's birds—the glass replicas are codified through a process of stylization. What lies beneath the veneer of appearances may, or may not, be mistaken for truth. As in McElheny's other works, both these pieces attempt to dislocate themselves from any certain status as objects. They shift from copies to originals and from clever frauds to true evidence. Each project is accompanied by a text with historical facts, or just possibly fictitious tales, which ultimately conflate the correlation between real and fake. Traditional ideas of authorship are undermined.

Religious rituals and the use of glass connect the work of McElheny to that of the French artist Michèle Blondel. Blondel uses certain symbolic associations of glass to imbue her work with Christian references. In medieval symbology, for instance, the filtering of light through glass is likened to the virgin birth of Christ from Mary—like "the phenomenon of light passing through the glass without breaking it."⁹

SELF-PORTRAIT AS A MERMAID is a collection of objects in green glass, meant to resemble the sea, while SELF-PORTRAIT AS A UNICORN is a grouping of glass pieces in a luminescent pink-amber (both from 1997). The objects all have feminine and religious connotations: shells, broken hearts, bowls, shoes, vases, mermaid tails, unicorn horns, and human body parts. In SELF-PORTRAIT AS A MERMAID, as in the fable, the

9. James Smith Pierce, *From Abacus to Zeus. A Handbook of Art History* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1991), p. 159.



mermaid's tail is cut off and lies on a fictional beach, along with her possessions. Without her tail, the mermaid is denied the completeness of her physical being and must wear shoes. Although mutilated and powerless, she can still walk—a state of being with strong psychological resonance that also appears in *SELF-PORTRAIT AS A UNICORN*. Here the unicorn, a symbol of abundance and life in medieval times, loses its effective agency because the horn is dismembered from its equine body.

Despite the narrative potential of such subjects, Blondel, a woman representing women, is unconcerned with giving thought systematic form or developing a linear narrative. In the past, as in the installation *DANS LA ZIBELINE DU ZOB* (1997), the exhibition checklist does not even mention individual works; it merely consists of a list of things: thirty-three red crystal bases, twenty red crystal drops, and seven wooden matrices arbitrarily arranged on a floor covered with Persian rugs. Blondel frequently favors this kind of open arrangement, in which individual pieces seem disposed almost by chance. But from these apparently unconnected pieces emerge perceptible references to female sexuality and Christianity as well as to sacrifice and mutilation. At this level, Blondel's magnetic and sensual translucent objects are somewhat enigmatic, yet allusive both to woman's oppressed status and the sacred and secular. Through these beautiful objects, Blondel is searching for a god distinctively feminine—an inquiry that, according to the French theorist and feminist Luce Irigaray, is a "search of position" in which woman must find her own voice.



This search is also expressed in the poetic writings and Minimalist-inspired art of Elena del Rivero. Her obsessive embroideries translate Minimalism, a language originally embraced by male artists, and assimilate many of its clichés—repetition, opposition between black and white, and geometric structures.

LETTERS TO THE MOTHER, LETTERS FROM THE BRIDE, and LETTERS TO THE OTHER are three series comprising more than two thousand letters that del Rivero began in late 1991. She embroiders on drawing paper, using a web of threads, pearls, beads, stitches, needles, and pins. In her unending work-in-progress, these patterns, or drawings as the artist calls them, are endlessly transformed by the eternal Penelope-like activity of doing and undoing.

LETTER TO THE MOTHER (c. 1919–96) is a singular letter among del Rivero's arresting works. It is made from an eighty-year-old, handmade, embroidered bridal linen sheet that originally belonged to her grandmother, who passed it on to her mother, who then passed it on to her. Into this evocative piece of cloth, the artist needleworked abstract and repetitive patterns in an attempt to regain her own voice. For del Rivero, these new embroideries say what she cannot say, and hide what she is not ready to express. The use of her grandmother's nuptial sheet as the support for her art is del Rivero's reaction against submission.

In LETTERS FROM THE BRIDE, del Rivero continues her obsessive exploration of the letter format as a vehicle for both personal and universal communication. In each missive, the "bride" changes her persona: she is a woman, a man, a child, a liar. She is

asserting that perhaps masculine Minimalist art is just an "echo [of] the eternal, unchanging, repetitive, [and] endless domestic work performed by nameless women."¹⁰ Del Rivero's motifs are words never sent, making it impossible to find a single meaning for the artist's work. Fragmented, as all letters are, each work possesses its own narrative, date, addressee, and its own poetic language. As autobiographical acts, they represent the habit of memory—what is left generates a revised form of the artist's own identity.

In art as well as in craft and architecture, interlaces are the patterns in which elements—threads, branches, stripes, lines—are designed to intercross with one another, passing alternately over and under, and thus intertwining. In "Interlacings," craft techniques, processes, and materials pass over and under contemporary art, fashioning a precursory type of intertwining—one that says that tradition is undergoing a change. This new and provocative crafts influence in art might be interpreted as evidence that craft, commonly viewed as a "conservative discipline,"¹¹ can no longer be summed up in a simple dictionary entry.

10. From the artist's description of her project *Five Letters*, to open next October at Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.

11. Ken Johnson, "Traditional Materials in Modern Incarnations," *The New York Times*, July 10, 1998, p. E38.



above

Elena del Rivero, *LETTER TO THE MOTHER*,
c. 1919–96 (detail)

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Dimensions are in inches followed by centimeters; height precedes width precedes depth.

SYLVIA BENITEZ

Born in Baltimore, 1957
Lives in New York
Studied at the University of Maryland,
College Park (BFA, 1979)

PETER AND PAUL, 1998

Vines, two balls, approximately 60 (152.4) diameter each
Collection of the artist

MICHÈLE BLONDEL

Born in Paris
Lives in Paris and New York
Studied at the École Nationale Supérieure des
Beaux-Arts, Paris
(Licence de Philosophie)

SELF-PORTRAIT AS A MERMAID and SELF-PORTRAIT AS A

UNICORN (selection of objects from each
work), 1997
Blown Baccarat crystal, dimensions variable
*Collection of the artist, Carsten Otto, and Susanne van
Hagen; courtesy Elga Wimmer Gallery, New York*

UNTITLED, 1997

Blown Baccarat crystal and dried fish, three parts,
6 x 4 1/2 (15.2 x 11.4) each
Collection of the artist; courtesy Elga Wimmer Gallery,
New York

ELENA DEL RIVERO

Born in Valencia, Spain, 1952
Lives in New York
Studied at the University of Valencia
(1971-74); Cambridge University, England
(Diploma, 1977); Conservatory
of Music, Madrid (1981); Estudio
Arjona and Oscar Manesi Workshop, Madrid
(1979-83)

THE SAMPLER, 1994

Thread and acrylic on linen, 10 (25.4) diameter
Collection of the artist

LETTER FROM THE BRIDE, 1996

Thread and oil on paper, 40 x 28 (101.6 x 71.1)
Collection of the artist

LETTER FROM THE BRIDE, 1996

Acrylic, thread, beads, and oil on paper, 40 x 28
(101.6 x 71.1)
Collection of the artist; courtesy Sandra Gering, New York,
and Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco

LETTER FROM THE BRIDE, 1996

Thread and oil on paper, 40 x 28 (101.6 x 71.1)
Collection of the artist; courtesy Sandra Gering, New York,
and Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco

LETTER TO THE MOTHER, c. 1919-96

Hand embroidery on old embroidered family bridal queen
bed sheet, thread on linen, 86 5/8 x 90 1/16 (220 x 230)
Collection of the artist

SONIA LABOURIAU

Born in Pasadena, California, 1956
Lives in Belo Horizonte, Brazil
Studied at the Fundação Escola Guignard,
Belo Horizonte (BA, 1983);
Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Belo
Horizonte (1984); San Francisco Art
Institute (1988)

MIGRATORY BIRDS, 1992-98

Urucum, seeds, binder, water, glass, and nine C-prints,
dimensions variable
Collection of the artist

JOSIAH McELHENY

Born in Boston, 1966
Lives in Seattle and New York
Studied with master glassblower Ronald Wilkins, London, 1987;
Rhode Island School of Design, Providence (BFA, 1988); apprentice to master glassblower Jan-Erik Ritzman, Transjö, Sweden, 1989-91; apprentice to master glassblower Lino Tagliapietra, various locations, 1992

FROM VERZELINI'S ACTS OF FAITH:
THE LAST SUPPER ACCORDING
TO BONIFAZIO PITATI AND BEATO
ANGELICO, 1996
Blown glass, text, and display case, 37 x 53 x 25
(94 x 134.6 x 63.5)
Collection of the artist; courtesy Donald Young Gallery, Chicago

GLASS FROM THE LAST SUPPER
ACCORDING TO JOSIAH McELHENY
AND ACCORDING TO VARIOUS
MIDDLE AND RENAISSANCE
PAINTERS, 1997
Blown glass, drawing, and table, 48 x 37 x 60
(121.9 x 94 x 152.4)
Collection of Frank Kolodny; courtesy AC Project Room, New York

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE SEARCH FOR INFINITY, 1998

Two blown-glass plates, text, photograph, and display case,
49 x 30 x 9 (124.5 x 76.2 x 22.9)
Collection of the artist; courtesy AC Project Room, New York, and Donald Young Gallery, Chicago

ROXY PAINE

Born in New York, 1966
Lives in New York
Studied at Pratt Institute, New York, NY;
College of Santa Fe, New Mexico

PSILOCYBE CUBENSIS TRAY, 1997
Polymer with lacquer and oil paint, steel tray,
7 x 25 3/4 x 17 3/4 (17.8 x 65.4 x 45.1)
Private collection; courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

PSILOCYBE CUBENSIS TRAY, 1997
Polymer with lacquer and oil paint, steel tray,
7 x 25 3/4 x 17 3/4 (17.8 x 65.4 x 45.1)
Private collection; courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

PSILOCYBE CUBENSIS TRAY
(PHOTOTROPIC RESPONSE), 1997
Polymer with lacquer and oil paint, steel tray,
7 x 25 3/4 x 17 3/4 (17.8 x 65.4 x 45.1)
Collection of James and Susan Phillips; courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

TERESA SERRANO

Born in Mexico City, 1936
Lives in New York and Mexico City

THE MOUNTAIN, 1995
Embroidered blanket and iron structure,
39 3/8 x 31 1/2 x 15 3/4 (100 x 80 x 40)
Collection of the artist

THE RIVER, 1996
Embroidered blanket, leather belts, and iron structure,
177 3/16 x 31 1/2 x 31 1/2 (450 x 80 x 80)
Collection of the artist

THE RIVER II, 1996
Embroidered blanket, leather belts, and iron structure,
177 3/16 x 31 1/2 x 31 1/2 (450 x 80 x 80)
Collection of the artist



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—B.S.

PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS

John Betancourt (Benitez, p.24);
Kyle R. Brooks (del Rivero, p.19);
Claire Garoutte (McElheny);
Jain June Jang (Benitez, p.9); Bill Orcutt
(Serrano); Rubén Orozco
(del Rivero, p.21); Ana Valadares
(Labouriau)

above

Sylvia Benitez, LEXICON FOR ELSIE, 1997
Unfired clay pinch pots on sack cloth,
dimensions variable
Installation view, Galeria Raices,
Hato Rey, Puerto Rico

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